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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS II #8: CHASING THE RED ROOSTER
- A SCRAMBLE FOR ELECTORAL ALLIANCES

1. (SBU) This is the eighth cable in a series reporting on
the second year of the administration of Dominican President
Leonel Fernandez.

Chasing The Red Rooster -- A Scramble For Electoral Alliances

Back-room talks on possible party alliances that began last
month are provoking heated commentary, a sure sign of
pre-electoral fever. In the country's triad of major parties,
every political chief dreams of organizing a coalition of two
against one, to sweep the elections and rake in jobs and
public money for the party faithful. Speculation now centers
on the third-ranked PRSC, the late President Balaguer's
Reformista Party, whose emblematic red rooster is coveted as
a partner in the 2006 mid-term elections by both the ruling
PLD and the main opposition PRD.

Ever since 1996, when Balaguer formed the Patriotic Front with
the PLD and propelled President Fernandez into office for his
first term, other parties have eyed the Reformistas as
potential kingmakers. They drew less than 9 percent of the
2004 presidential vote, and three years after Balaguer's
death their depleted ranks retain only 12-13 percent of the
electorate. But that would be enough for the PRSC to serve
as a swing vote to bolster the ruling PLD's rickety
Congressional and municipal representation or to shore up the
eroding base of the scandal- and faction-ridden PRD as the
main opposition party. Both leading parties have made
tempting offers to the Reformistas.

Some Reformistas are resisting. Former PRSC presidential
candidate Eduardo Estrella has consistently spoken out
against alliances and said the party should continue its firm
opposition to the PLD government; PRSC vice president Luis
Toral has taken up this cry, emphasizing the party's
"identity and dignity." PRSC president Federico "Quique"
Antun announced November 10 that the inter-party talks had
been "suspended for the moment."

But the PRSC rank and file, weary of having spent nearly a
decade in the opposition, wouldn't mind having another chance
at returning to power -- or at least sharing it. A poll
published November 14 showed that 76 percent of Reformistas
favor an alliance with another party for the Congressional
and municipal elections next May. Eduardo Estrella's former
campaign advisor, ex-minister Victor Gomez Berges, has
admitted to political officer that "there is great pressure"
from party members on this issue. According to PRSC
Congressional spokesman Ramon Rogelio Genao, "We need to
unite our efforts in search of a national project that will
result in a development plan for the next 20 years,
regardless of the color of the party that happens to be in
the Government." He added that the poll had provided data on
which alliance might be "most beneficial" to the PRSC and
said the party leadership would publish these findings at an
appropriate time.

An alliance with the ruling PLD would appear to be the PRSC's
first option. Many Reformistas felt cheated after the 1996
election victory when, they complained, their coalition
partner the PLD excluded them from getting their expected
share of the spoils. They branded the PLD as "comesolos" --
solitary diners who hogged the opportunities for public
employment and patronage. Last year, a small but prominent
group of Reformistas, led by Carlos Morales Troncoso, broke
with the rest of the PRSC to support Fernandez and gained
four senior government jobs. Another member of this group,
National Housing Bank president Leonardo Matos Berrido, has
confirmed publicly that the group will back the PLD in 2006.
Matos referred to the precedent set by Balaguer, who never in
his many elections allied with the PRD, which he regarded as
the PRSC's arch-rival. Balaguer agreed to link up with the
PLD as the only means to prevent the PRD from winning the
presidency.

The PLD, with far fewer legislative seats or municipal
governments, has been generous in the initial offer by
presidential chief of staff Danilo Medina and colleagues: a

proposed coalition slate would have 16 Reformista senatorial candidates out of 32, 60 candidates of 178 for the lower house of Congress, and 60 of 150-some mayoral candidates. By comparison, the PRSC currently has 2 senators, 35 congressmen, and 11 mayors. The PLD even offered to let Reformista Johnny Jones) currently the party's pre-candidate for mayor of the capital) run instead for the post of senator from the National District. This would mean PLD secretary general Reynaldo Pared Perez would drop out of the senatorial race) and Pared Perez was in the meeting. Reformista congressional spokesman Deputy Vctor "Ito" Bisono told political officer November 15 that PRSC political committee is actively considering the PLD offer.

The top PRD leadership is now engaged in a special working group on the issue, including former President Hipolito Mejia and 2008 presidential aspirant Miguel Vargas Maldonado. The PRD dominates Congress, controls most of the nation's city halls, and is loath to negotiate away those advantages. Their latest offer to the Reformistas is calculated to match that of the PLD: 12 senatorial candidacies including those of the National District and the province of Santo Domingo (which make up the capital metro area) and the candidacy for Santiago, the nation's second city; 70 candidates for the lower house; and 50 mayors. The latter figures "could be increased in the framework of the talks." PRD National District chairman Cesar Cabrera has commented to us that, while the PLD might offer more economic advantages to the Reformistas, the party could derive more political benefit from going with the PRD. As part of a united opposition, the PRSC would be free to formulate its own criticisms of the Fernandez administration, and Reformista candidates could draw on their party's own proposals during the campaign. As of November 17, PRD secretary general Orlando Jorge Mera, who is involved in the talks, was privately optimistic his party would clinch the deal with the PRSC.

Similar negotiations prior to the 1998 and 2002 mid-term elections proved fruitless. However this comes out, Reformistas are facing the reality that without their beloved caudillo, the party is an also-ran. An alliance would enable the PRSC to shrug off pejorative remarks about its becoming a "comodin" (joker) in Dominican politics and reaffirm its tradition as the party that has ruled longest since Trujillo. But the embrace of either the PRD or especially the PLD could prove to be suffocating for the debilitated PRSC.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.

13. (U) This piece and others in our series can be consulted at our SIPRNET web site (<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo>) along with extensive other material.
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